

Book Reviews

Robert Erikson and Rune Aberg (eds): **Welfare in Transition. A Survey of Living Conditions in Sweden 1968–1981.** Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

Welfare in Transition is a comprehensive report on living conditions in Sweden over a period of 13 years from 1968 to 1981, a period which is characterized by a change from widespread optimism at the beginning to widespread awareness of an economic and societal crisis. The aim of the book is mainly descriptive: to give a detailed, quantitative picture of the levels, the distribution, and the trends in welfare and living conditions for this period which allows an account of the Swedish 'level of living'. Such information represents a crucial contribution, especially for an assessment of the success of the Swedish welfare state and its distribution policy.

But what is welfare or 'level of living', and how is it to be measured? The answer given in this book is a microscopic, action-oriented approach: welfare—or level of living—is theoretically defined as 'the individual's command over resources to control and consciously direct his living conditions' in a given context (which largely influences the usefulness of different kinds of resources). This definition implies a multidimensional approach but still leaves open which actual resources and conditions are crucial for the level of living. A pragmatic way to solve this problem chosen by the authors is the selection of *ten welfare components* or living areas: mortality, health and health care utilization, employment and working hours, working conditions, economic resources, educational resources, housing conditions, political resources, family and social integration, leisure and recreation. Better or worse positions in these living areas are supposed to indicate different levels of living. Of course, this selection of living areas is partly an arbitrary and incomplete one (so I miss environmental conditions, a topic which was not yet in the public mind in 1968)—but which selection could be the only definitive one? Anyway, it corresponds very well to similar concepts developed by the UN, the OECD, and research groups in other countries, and it surely represents generally accepted goals in individual life as well as in welfare policy.

The authors try to answer three questions for all the ten welfare components: (i) Has the level changed from 1968 to 1981? (ii) How is welfare distributed

according to four background characteristics: are there differences among sexes, classes, types of community, or different age groups? (iii) Have these differences increased or decreased over time: that is, has the distribution of welfare got more or less equal? One additional chapter deals with class structure as a major dimension in Swedish politics and another with the cumulation of, and interdependencies, between problematic resource levels in the ten living areas.

The data base of the report is three 'Level of Living Surveys' conducted in 1968, 1974, and 1981. The samples were representative of the Swedish population 15–75 years old. The surveys of 1974 and 1981 are mostly replications of the 1968 survey, and they are, moreover, a panel for the majority of the selected cases. All participants of the original survey still under the age of 76 in 1974 and 1981 respectively were sought for re-interview—with good success: the 1981 sample includes 74 per cent of the 1968, and 85 per cent of the 1974 participants. This panel was augmented with a sample of young people between 15 and 20 (1974) and 15 and 21 (1981) and of new immigrants who had come to Sweden during the corresponding years, so that the samples remained representative of the age range 15–75. Each sample includes about 6,500 standardized interviews.

The differentiation of higher and lower welfare levels in the ten living areas is measured in these surveys only by objective indicators. No subjective or evaluative indicators are used. This limitation seems reasonable for a welfare concept based on the availability of resources and on scope for action. It emphasizes living conditions which can be influenced and shaped by welfare policies. But it does not take into account that the same resources and scope for action are used by different individuals with varying efficiency and that 'given contexts' (see the welfare definition above) and individual life-goals determining the usefulness of resources are becoming more and more differentiated between various population groups. And in general the concentration on objective indicators gets the more problematic the less generally accepted standards for a living area exist. Examples in this book are mainly the chapters on

leisure and recreation and that on social relations, where welfare levels can hardly be fixed without indicators of the quality (cognitive and emotional content) of social relations.

Anyway, the quality and quantity of the empirical information presented by the authors is impressive and allows many interesting insights into Swedish living conditions, which are also the results of the Swedish model of a welfare state. The findings are presented in tables, figures and special diagrams for multiple regressions. The latter cannot be understood without a particular explanation given in chapter 2. But then I found them a remarkable solution for presenting economically a lot of information and allowing a quick global overview as well as very detailed analyses.

Let us come back to the three questions mentioned above. First, has the level of living changed from 1968 to 1981? In sum, the answer must be 'yes'. Mortality has decreased, extremely long working hours were reduced substantially, incomes and consumption rose considerably, housing conditions have improved dramatically, and even social integration seems to have got better, contrary to the picture of growing isolation painted in the mass media as well as by many social scientists. The state of health has not risen despite all efforts (as in many other countries too), and the risk of unemployment has even increased. But, compared to other countries, the unemployment rate is still comparably low and can thus be interpreted as a success of Swedish policy. Remarkable too are the findings concerning political activities. In opposition to the widespread prejudices that an extended and bureaucratic welfare state puts its citizens under tutelage, political participation became more active and a rising percentage of people believe that they can defend themselves against public authorities.

Neither the absolute levels in the ten living areas nor the changes during the 13-year period are equally distributed among different population groups. *Class* is still a fairly stable major determinant for varying living conditions, especially with respect to mortality, health, risk of unemployment, working conditions, wealth and consumption, political participation, and housing conditions. As an effect of political measures—mainly the transfer system and a general increase in employment—a clear equalization of individual incomes can be observed. But this has not so much touched disparities between classes as between sexes and age groups. In contrast, one cannot say whether the younger or the older *age groups* are collectively better off. Younger people are (of course) healthier, get a better education, and have

more leisure activities. On the other hand, they run a greater risk of being victims of crime, and they often cannot realize their education in (proper) jobs. The age group with the greatest improvement in economic resources are the pensioners. The differences in the level of living among *types of community* remained relatively small and stable. Perhaps the most impressive changes concerned the differences between the sexes, especially changes in women's living conditions. Differences in political activity levels decreased, and sex segregation in the labour market is decreasing too—though there still exist extreme disparities between the sexes in regard to career and income opportunities, with women moving mainly to part-time work in the public sector. In spite of the increased female labour force participation, women's responsibility for housework remained fairly untouched, though there is a certain movement towards a gender levelling.

All in all, the surveys show a period of a general amelioration in most living areas, with a slight tendency towards diminishing differences between classes, age groups, and the sexes. There is a general tendency towards coexistence of welfare problems, especially for older people, for the working class, and for women. Yet the proportion of people with multiple problems dropped sharply: in the most prominent problem group—older working-class women—the proportion with at least three problems in five level-of-living components dropped from 47 per cent in 1968 to 17 per cent in 1981! This is at least partly a consequence of increased pensions, since low income resources seem to be of central importance for the cumulation of problematic welfare levels.

The value of the rich material presented in this volume is beyond any doubt. The empirical data are thoughtfully discussed and always related to a common procedure and the overarching aims of the analysis. The data base and methods are carefully presented in special chapters. Let me close with just two critical points. First, the limitation of the sample to people not older than 75 years excludes the very old, a population group which is growing in size and importance for welfare politics. Second, I was unable to find any panel analyses, although the data base is mainly a panel. It would have been interesting to compare structural changes at the level of frequency distributions for the whole sample and subgroups—as they are described in the book—with individual fluctuations. Information of this kind is crucial, especially for the identification of problem groups and the success of corresponding welfare policies.

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